

Edwards: Coble should resign panel leadership

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By ALEX WAYNE, Staff Writer
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GREENSBORO -- Sen. John Edwards said Tuesday that remarks Rep. Howard Coble made last month in support of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II suggest that he is not fit to lead a House subcommittee on homeland security.

"Someone who thinks it was OK for the United States to put innocent Americans behind barbed wire fences in 1942 should not make decisions about how to protect Americans in 2003," Edwards, the North Carolina Democrat, said in a written statement issued in response to a media inquiry.

Coble's remarks, made during an appearance Feb. 4 on WKZL-FM's "Murphy in the Morning" radio show, have caused an unusual amount of controversy for the normally low-key Greensboro Republican.

During the show, Coble disagreed with a caller who suggested that all Arabs in America should be put into prison camps. But he said he supported President Franklin D. Roosevelt's decision to detain Japanese Americans.

"We were a different society back then," he said in an interview the next day. "We were not a multicultural society. We were not as tolerant as we are now."

Coble said that the internment of Japanese Americans seemed to be the right thing to do at the time and under the circumstances but that it would not be appropriate today.

"They were an endangered species," he said. "For many of these Japanese Americans, it wasn't safe for them to be on the street."

After being criticized by Japanese American and Democratic colleagues in the House and by several Asian American advocacy groups, Coble issued a statement on Feb. 10 that apologized for his "choice of words." Coble's staff referred reporters to that statement Tuesday in response to Edwards' remarks.

"I regret that many Japanese and Arab Americans found my choice of words offensive because that was certainly not my intent," Coble said. He added that "given the circumstances in which President Roosevelt found himself at the time and the information that was available to him, he made a decision which he felt was in the best interest of national security."

"We all now know that this was in fact the wrong decision and an action that should never be repeated."

Edwards hadn't publicly commented on the situation before Tuesday. In his statement, he called Coble's remarks "divisive" and "ill-informed."

"He was wrong, and he ought to apologize," Edwards said. "As leaders, elected officials have an obligation not to divide, but to bring groups together. Leadership means thinking of American in terms

of 'us,' not 'them.' Leadership means being committed every day to making equality a reality. It means learning from the past and making a better future for everyone. Representative Coble failed to lead."

Coble was appointed chairman of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security in January. The subcommittee handles legislation governing domestic security and terrorism programs, drug-interdiction efforts and the federal prison system.

Some of Coble's critics, including the Japanese American Citizens League and Muslims for a Better North Carolina, have called for Coble to resign the position. Coble has refused, saying in February that "I don't think what I said in any way makes me unfit to chair that committee."

Coble's chief of staff, Missy Branson, said Tuesday that she and Coble have not discussed the possibility of his resigning the subcommittee chairmanship. She said that she knows of no pressure from Republican congressional leaders for Coble to do so.

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